

Cleanup of warehouse fire site begins

by Rachel Newton

Cleanup has officially begun at the site of a warehouse fire at Pine Bluff Arsenal. The cleanup is expected to continue through mid-January.

Arsenal officials recently awarded a \$2.3 million dollar contract to PIKA International of Houston, Texas to do the cleanup work, according to Charlie Neel, chief of environmental compliance for the Directorate of Risk Management and Regulatory Affairs.

"PIKA has started moving in their people and preparing some plans," said Neel during a recent interview at the fire site. "They have also done some engineering design work on how to handle some of the materials that are left from the fire."

The fire, which was discovered through a routine security check, occurred in the early morning hours June 6 in a vintage, World War II warehouse storing canisters of white phosphorus.

White phosphorus or WP is a white or pale yellow, translucent waxy chemical solid used in ammunition by the military for dense white smoke screenings or signals. In the presence of oxygen, WP spontaneously ignites. Pine Bluff Arsenal is the Army's sole producer of WP ammunition in the Western Hemisphere.

One of the first steps in the clean up process, according to Neel, is to clear any debris from around the site. "When we start working with white phosphorus, safety is the most important aspect," he said. "We are willing to sacrifice time on our schedule to make sure that no one gets hurt. There was equipment that needed to be designed as well as some serious site safety and health plans that had to be written. Rather than rush in, we have taken the time to do the planning."

The contracting work also took some time, said Neel.

The initial part of the cleanup will be done by workers in full-face respirators and impermeable suits, according to Don Hansen, PIKA's asbestos supervisor.

Since the fire and subsequent flare-ups, Arsenal fire department personnel have kept the site cooled through a system of sprinklers. "The fire department has been monitoring the site daily since the fire occurred. We've had no smoke, no flare ups," said Tom Braumuller, PBA assistant fire chief. "The sprinklers are doing what they are designed to do. They are keeping the pile cool until cleanup starts."

According to Neel, once the debris is removed from the site it will be segregated into different types. "If it is metals or ash it will go to the Jefferson County landfill because it is solid waste," he said. "Anything that is contaminated with hazardous waste will go to Von Roll Waste Technologies Industries at East Liverpool, Ohio."

Arsenal and fire investigators determined that a leaking WP canister caused the fire. According to the final investigation report, the WP leaked from the canister through a pinhole caused by oxidation. Heat generated by the exposed WP heated the nearby canisters, igniting the roof framing, and causing total loss of the structure.

There are no immediate plans to rebuild the warehouse.